



# Lucky DeBellevue

Khlysty, the Owls, and the Others

January 18 – April 5, 2002

**WHITNEY**

Whitney Museum of American Art  
at Philip Morris



## Khlysty, the Owls, and the Others: *A Tale of Hopeful Monsters*

**Hopeful monsters:** Term derived from the “punctuated equilibrium” theory of evolution, which posits that macromutations “punctuating” an otherwise placid gene pool are responsible for the creation of new species. Occasionally, such large-scale genetic changes produce a “hopeful monster” possessing uniquely adaptive traits—the progenitor of a distinctly original species.

*I work in this way to try to maintain a sense of discovery. I’m not just trying to be a channeller of spontaneity, and I am as much commenting on these things as I am a participant. I like the analogy of the hopeful monster.... It is an accident that brings things forward.*

—Lucky DeBellevue <sup>1</sup>

Turn away for a moment from the frenzied crowds and icy winds of midtown Manhattan and escape into the chimerical world of Lucky DeBellevue’s multiobject installation *Khlysty, the Owls, and the Others*, currently inhabiting the Sculpture Court of the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. After the disorder and claustrophobia of the street, the vast space of the Sculpture Court is especially remarkable, spanning over a hundred feet long and soaring forty feet above your head. The pink granite that cloaks the walls does little to soften the ponderously corporate effect of the architecture’s powerful lines. Off to the left, however, an incongruously organic silhouette catches your eye: rising from a circle of color puddled on the floor like the train of an unconventional bride, *Otter*’s lacy, velvety form stretches up into the air. The deep black of its base brightens to various shades of blue that, as the fantastical object extends ever upward, bloom into fiery reds and oranges near its apogee. The tip of the winsome, Gaudi-esque spire narrows to a golden rope linking the fifteen-foot sculpture to the ceiling high above.

Closer inspection reveals that the structure is composed entirely of pipe cleaners (also known as chenille stems). Recalling memories of childhood art projects, here this homely material has been



OPPOSITE, FAR LEFT:

*Lady Rochford*, 2001. Chenille stems, plastic, and feathers, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist; courtesy Feature Inc, New York (installation view)

OPPOSITE, LEFT:

*The Owls*, 2001 (detail). Aluminum tooling foil and plastic, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist; courtesy Feature Inc, New York

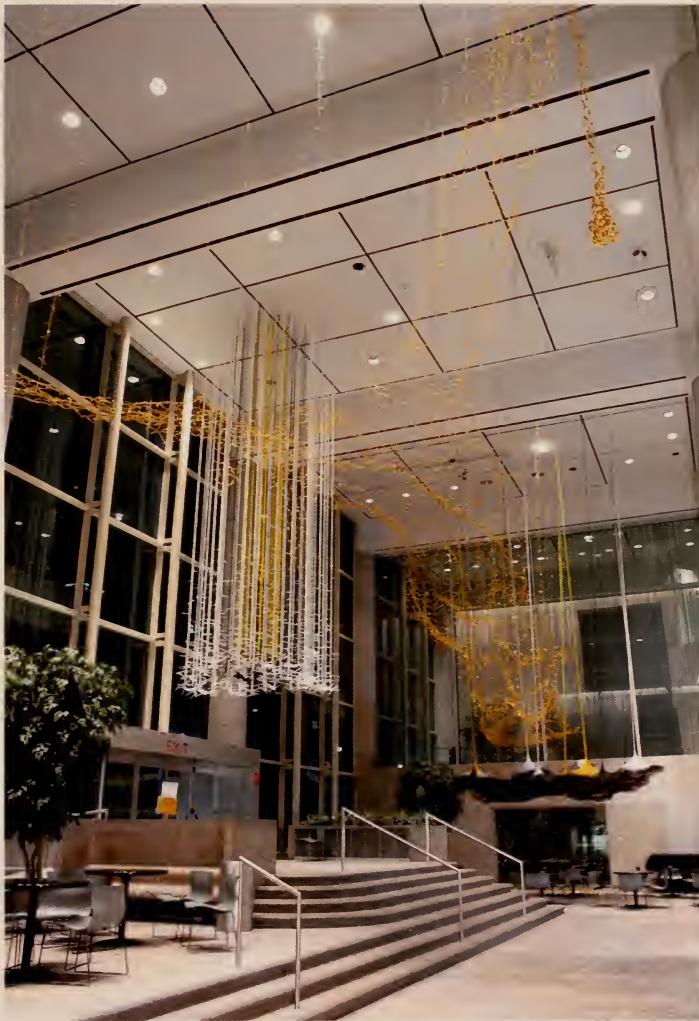
RIGHT:

*Khlysty, the Owls, and the Others*, 2002 (installation view)

employed in a far more evocative and complex manner, while retaining its inviting approachability. The textures and colors shift before your eyes like a mirage, and, drawing near, you discover that you can enter the form from one side, into a narrow grotto where only a little light filters through the mesh of colors. Standing within the sculpture provokes oddly conflicting sensations, a slightly unnerving feeling of confinement mingled with a poignant sense of recognition. The soft, enveloping darkness evokes nebulous memories of both treasured childhood hiding places, redolent of imagination and daydreams, and an adolescent's less innocent refuges. At the same time, the piece feels like the concrete manifestation of a more generalized sense of reassurance and comfort—security made fuzzily tangible.

Leaving the embrace of your newfound haven and moving through the enormous atrium space, you are captivated by *Khlysty*, a shimmering, glittering gold web that emerges from an openwork weave screening a large window at the far end of the Sculpture Court. The flower bed abutting the window sprouts filaments of the same material, as though golden vines had taken root there, their fertile abundance spilling from the bed. The ambitious offshoot of gold webbing grows out of the profusion and reaches up and across the space, forking at the end like a snake's tongue into two tendrils that anchor the piece to a wall on one side and, on the other, to the top of a window. The glittering net trembles and undulates as if alive, provoking a shiver of unease as it recalls alien life-forms both beautiful and potentially dangerous.

Like *Otter*, *Khlysty* conjures multiple disparate references, the luxuriant golden structure evoking the dazzlingly colorful decor of Indian restaurants, the opulence of contemporary haute couture, the extravagance of Baroque architecture. *Khlysty* visually captures the earnest drama of its referents, while wittily subverting their gravity through the choice of medium. Gold—used throughout history to indicate rarity and elevated status—is here reinterpreted in an essentially disposable, tinselly pipe cleaner.



Venturing under the webbing, you see that each chenille stem has been carefully twisted into place in the web's rigorously consistent pattern, giving the piece a structural character the strength of which is in stark contrast to the ethereality of its visual effect. In fact, all of the works share this ambiguity: their meticulous construction and architectural structure are at odds with both the flimsy medium and, in some cases, the filigreed airiness of the forms. At the top of the stairs to the Park Avenue entrance of the Sculpture Court, for example, *Soft Butch* hangs from the ceiling on plastic chains, just beyond reach. Approximately ten feet in diameter, the structure comprises a series of supple, bristly concentric circles. The breezy lightness of the piece seems palpably feminine; in fact, all of the semiorganic sculptures that populate the atrium encourage the impulse to assign them a gender. *Soft Butch's* visual impression of mass dissolves as you approach and realize it is constructed entirely from hundreds of feathers and plastic twist ties. Notwithstanding its diaphanous insubstantiality, the piece acts as a virtual canopy, closing off the enormous height of the ceiling. Its shape defines a perceptibly unique space within the atrium's architectural context, akin to, if less sharply defined than, *Otter's* cave-like interior.

Similarly, beneath the golden web arching overhead, *The Underneath* hangs just above the café area, so low that you can feel it hovering over you, circumscribing its own intimate pocket of private space. The enclave described by its enormous size—almost twenty feet across—is both comforting and oppressive. Its pattern, also expressed in velvety chenille stems, recalls military camouflage, the design effectively obscuring itself even as it conceals you.

Resembling a small, fantastical animal poised to skitter across the slick granite floor, *Lady Rochford* is easy to overlook. Its rich pink and purple body suggests a lavish Renaissance gown, an impression underscored by the courtly title. The sensual, voluptuous form implies an intimately feminine form, while it also eerily recalls a metamorphosing, possibly viral, organism. The apparent animation of the piece highlights the illusion of sentient life shared by all the sculptures, despite the transparent artificiality of their components.

The pipe cleaners, twist ties, and plastic chains are blatantly low-tech, even cheap, media, but the equally obvious refinement of craft and rigorous technique dissociates them from their humble origins. At the same time, the mass-produced stems and ties may also be construed as a nod to the Pop Art concept of the ready-made—the recognition, even the celebration, of the byproducts of the machine age. The marriage of these materials to such an intensely laborious, transparently handmade approach is far removed from the techno-slick aesthetic prevalent in contemporary art. Instead, the pieces offer a beguiling synthesis of the kitschy materials and the idea of “high art” often associated with museums. The melding of such putatively antagonistic oppositions is mirrored in both the seamless introduction of organically evocative forms into this rigid architectural geometry and in the colors themselves, changing from one to the next with almost painterly fluidity.

Though all of the pieces are characterized by a painstaking attention to detail and labor-intensive creative process, they do not share any single pattern of construction. Rather, each structure's unique logic is determined incrementally, moment by moment, in a process that, while technically exacting, is notably and fundamentally human in its essence. As in the development of a train of thought, the connections that link each step from point A to point B comply with the internal logic of the thinker's referential process, even while they may appear random to an outsider. The artist has likened his method to a game of chess, in which basic overall strategies and direction are tempered by the flexibility to modify that pattern almost intuitively as each move is made.<sup>2</sup>

“Khlysty,” which serves both as the name of the golden structure soaring overhead and as the dominant element in the installation's title, is a reference by the artist to the nineteenth-century

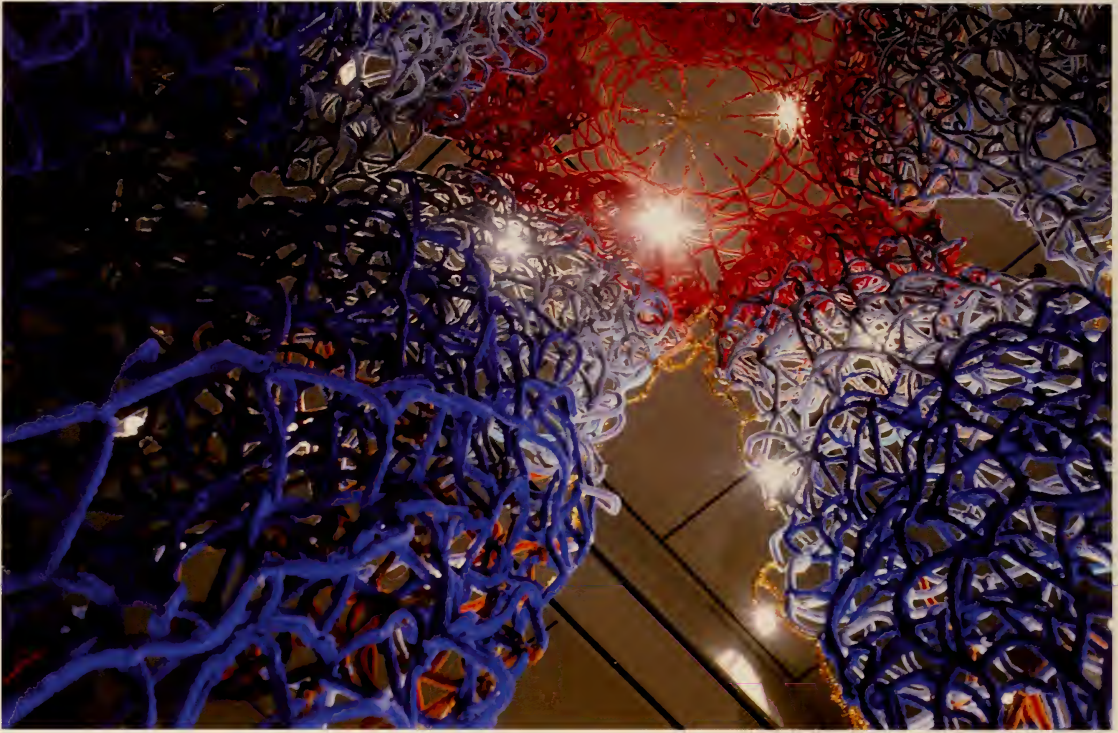




*Khlysty, the Owls, and the Others*, 2002 (installation view)

cleric Grigory Rasputin.<sup>3</sup> Over the last century, this notorious figure has become more myth than man, the apotheosis of decadence and mystic spirituality. Rasputin has been linked to the Khlyst, an esoteric Christian sect whose adherents believed in the deification of the flesh and sought enlightenment and salvation through the ritualistic enactment of the most extreme carnal sins. The synthesis of spirituality and physicality implied by the title seems to fit the installation well. The tangible femininity or masculinity of several pieces holding court in the atrium reflects the luscious corporeality of their shapes: *Otter's* bubbling, erect form, for example, or the alternately feathery and hairy recesses of *Soft Butch*. The material sensuality of these works combines with the spiritual ephemerality of the gold webbing to conflate the ideas of body and soul.

Even divorced from its historical context, the installation's fanciful title suggests a fairy tale recounting the intrepid adventures of a motley band of characters, an apt recognition of the works' apparent sentience. While every sculpture functions as an integral part of the visual impression of the space as a whole, each piece also manifests its own unique personality. Like *Khlysty*, the seemingly arbitrary collection of titles in fact refers to the belief systems and codes of behavior by which people identify themselves. *Lady Rochford*, referencing a character from a historically based television series, alludes to the strict rules of courtly life, as well as the machinations often required to negotiate them. *Otter* and *Soft Butch* borrow their names from homosexual communities, social groups as self-regimented by physical and behavioral rubrics as that which *Lady Rochford* invokes. The notion of codified identities is, of course, equally relevant to mainstream, contemporary culture: lifestyles that cleave to certain rules or social behaviors provide an essential framework by which people define themselves and construct their "places" in the world. It is eminently human to desire the certainty and security of such predetermined codes—a security literalized in the physical safety and comfort proffered by the cozy insides of *Otter*.



Together, the sculptures read as instantiations of the metaphorical sanctums we fashion for ourselves and occupy in daily life, their margins reassuringly familiar but inevitably restrictive. Ultimately, of course, that which makes you feel free may also be what ties you down. This ambivalence is yet another example of the unresolved tensions expressed in the installation: the contradiction between the natural and the artificial, the beautiful and the grotesque, the glamorous and the abject, the high and the low, the mind and the body, the organic forms and the rigid, geometric architecture. Most intriguing is that the artist seems uninterested in fully synthesizing such oppositions, choosing rather to celebrate their concurrent existence.

And where, amidst this surreal menagerie that has integrated itself into the anonymity of the Sculpture Court, are the titular Owls? Located to be seen as you turn to leave the Sculpture Court, the small flock perches over the glass doors. Created from what appears to be heavy aluminum foil, soft outlines melting into one another, their owl-ness is indicated with minimal articulation. They too are conspicuous in their ambiguity. Their blank, silver eye sockets staring downward

imply an ominous surveillance, a germane reference in today's world. Simultaneously, they stand as the artist's benign intermediaries—playfully innocuous, even protective observers. Their parting benediction is a welcome coda to your stroll through DeBellevue's magical woods and, once again confronting the Manhattan bustle, you smile.

—Shamim M. Momin

#### Notes

1. Interview with the artist by Hudson held at Feature Inc, New York, September 1997.
2. Taped interview with the artist by Shamim M. Momin, 5 November 2001.
3. The artist cites *The Rasputin File* by Edvard Radzinsky (New York: Doubleday, 2001) as influential in his conception of the exhibition as well as its title. Taped interview with the artist by Shamim M. Momin, 5 November 2001.

Otter, 2001. Chenille stems, dimensions variable.  
Collection of the artist; courtesy Feature Inc, New York  
(installation detail)



## Lucky DeBellvue

Born in Lafayette, Louisiana, 1957  
University of Southwestern Louisiana.  
Lafayette (BFA, 1983)  
University of New Orleans (MFA, 1987)  
Lives and works in New York City

### Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1997

Feature Inc, New York  
Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst  
Realismus Studio, in collaboration with  
Künstlerhaus Am Acker! e.V., Berlin

1998

Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris

1999

*The Underneath* + Tray, Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Chicago

2000

Carlsen Center, Johnson County Community  
College, Overland Park, Kansas  
Feature Inc, New York

### Selected Group Exhibitions

1992

*Twisted Vision/Version (Irony)*, Four Walls,  
Brooklyn, New York

1993

*Urban Analysis*, Barbara Braathen Gallery,  
New York  
*The Return of the Cadavre Exquis*, The Drawing  
Center, New York  
*The Art of Self-Defense and Revenge...It's Really Hard*,  
Momenta Art, New York

1994

*Friends, Romans & Countrymen*, Feature Inc,  
New York

1995

*Malex Faux*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

1996

*Ab Fab*, Feature Inc, New York  
*Fancy*, New World Arts Center, organized by  
Pilot Arts, New York

1997

*Current Undercurrent: Working in Brooklyn*,  
Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York  
*Polly Apfelbaum/Lucky DeBellvue*, Dalarnas  
Museum, Falun, Sweden  
*The Picrogi 2000 Flat Files: New York Drawers*,  
Gasworks, London  
*The Experimenters*, Lombard Freid Fine Arts,  
New York

1998

*Humble County*, D'Amelio Terras, New York  
*'Science'*, Feature Inc, New York  
*Sassy Nuggets*, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York  
Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles

1999

*Up Your Head*, Feature Inc, New York  
*curious.parlang@stupendous.strawberry*, Galerie  
S. & H. De Buck, Ghent, Belgium  
Brent Sikkema, New York  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

2000

*New York Projects*, Delfina Project Space, London  
*collected (in mind)*, Sandra Gering Gallery, New York  
*soft core*, Joseph Helman Gallery, New York  
*Dusk*, I-20 Gallery, New York  
*Greater New York: New Art in New York Now*, P.S.1  
Contemporary Art Center/The Museum of  
Modern Art, Long Island City, New York

2001

*Exhibition of Work By Newly Elected Members and  
Recipients of Honors and Awards*, American  
Academy of Arts and Letters, New York  
*Not a Lear*, Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York  
*Alterations*, James Graham & Sons, New York

### Artist Acknowledgments

My thanks and gratitude to the following people for  
their help in realizing the work for this exhibition:  
Graham Anderson, Ricci Albenda, Michael Allen, Pam  
Lins, and especially Francesca DiMattio. I would also  
like to thank Elizabeth Smith, chief curator at the  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, for commissioning  
*The Underneath*, and the people who worked with me on  
it: Jeff Davis, Jonah Freeman, Amy Gartrell, and Marlo  
Pascual. Thanks also to the Whitney installation crew  
Filippo Gentile, G.R. Smith, and, from Philip Morris, Ted  
Horlebein. Thanks to Shamim Momin, who encouraged  
my ideas and interventions, Molly Larkey, and Howie  
Chen from the Whitney at Philip Morris. And last but  
not least, thanks to Feature Inc, New York.

# WHITNEY

## Gallery Hours

Monday–Friday 11 am–6 pm

Thursday 11 am–7:30 pm

## Sculpture Court Hours

Monday–Saturday 7:30 am–9:30 pm

Sunday 11 am–7 pm

## Gallery Talks

Wednesdays and Fridays, 1 pm

Free admission

Tours by appointment

For more information, call (917) 663-2453.

## Staff

Shamim M. Momin

*Branch Director and Curator*

Howie Chen

*Gallery/Curatorial Assistant*

Austin Yang

*Gallery/Education Assistant*

The Whitney Museum of American Art  
at Philip Morris is funded by Philip Morris  
Companies Inc.

This brochure accompanies the exhibition  
*Lucky DeBellevue: Khlysty, the Owls, and the Others*,  
organized by Shamim M. Momin, branch director  
and curator, Whitney Museum of American Art  
at Philip Morris.

©2002 Whitney Museum of American Art  
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street  
New York, NY 10021  
[www.whitney.org](http://www.whitney.org)



## Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

120 Park Avenue at 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10017

### ABOVE:

*Soft Butch*, 2001. Plastic chains, cable ties, and feathers, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist; courtesy Feature Inc, New York (installation detail)

### COVER, PAGES 2 AND 4:

*Khlysty, the Owls, and the Others*, 2002. Plastic chains, chenille stems, and feathers, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist; courtesy Feature Inc, New York (installation view)

All photographs by George Hirose.